

The role of the bishop and the diocese

I'm focusing on the two primary things a diocese needs to do: first, be clear that the primary task is parish revitalization. The bishop needs to say, "I am about the shaping of parishes, so they are healthy, faithful and growing. Second, "We are not spending our energy and resources on trying to close parishes."

We are about parish revitalization

The orientation

Here's the orientation we need to instill in parish priests and lay leaders. Really, it's two questions they need to have in their mind. Questions that shift the conversation into a fruitful place:

"Do you believe there are a significant percentage of people who would find this Anglican/Episcopal way of being Christians attractive if only they knew?"

And

"Do you think that the world would be well served if there were more people living full and faithful lives in that tradition?"

It's a statement of value. That there is something worthy in who we are when we "do our thing." Many of us know that our hearts leap a bit when we come across someone living the spiritual practices and the ethos of this tradition.

Bishops need to get clear

OK House of Bishops, all together now, "The primary task of a diocese is to shape healthy, faithful and growing parish churches." Great, now say, "I will."

Here's the awful fact—most dioceses have done nothing near what is necessary to turn things around. Nothing even close. Nothing! Some have spent money and time chasing "solutions" from those who don't really understand our tradition. Many have done little more than make gestures.

We can do better.

A diocesan parish development system

If the bishop will put into place the core elements of a diocesan parish development system, things will improve in five to seven years. It needs to be lead by people with the necessary training and experience and all the pieces need to be operational.

The core elements are:

1. The bishop needs to monitor parishes and intervene in ways that advance the primary task of parish health.

Work with the stable and healthy parishes to build upon their strength. Work with and those growing static or in decline to address that trend. There needs to be a weekly meeting of a parish concerns team in the bishop's office. Yes, weekly.

2. The sense of direction needs to be clear.

We are about shaping healthy, faithful, and growing parishes. The bishop's staff and other diocesan groups have organized themselves to focus on the task.

3. There needs to be a strategy

A strategy for facilitating movement, building capacity, selecting and equipping clergy leadership, dealing with parishes sliding into decline or those already deeply in decline and moving toward internal disintegration.

4. A system of resources needs to be in place.

Substantial training of parish teams that always includes the clergy.

5. The heart of the matter

At the heart of our efforts for parish development is the need to do three difficult, strategic things:

- Manage the "demand system"
- Develop trust between parishes and the diocese
- Build the diocese's capacity for parish development

There's more of course but these five things are the core. [More on the core elements.](#)

The bishop's personal attention

It requires the bishop's personal attention. Start with the weekly meetings to monitor and the follow through. Follow through that acts to strengthen the strong and lift up the weak. The bishop needs to either have training and experience in the complex dynamics of revitalization or have such a person at hand.

The bishops need to spend more time in their dioceses if we are to develop our parish churches. My impression is that over the years there's been a drift toward a condition in which bishops spend more and more time out of the diocese—meetings of the House of Bishops, meetings of a bishop support group, regional meetings, consecrations of new bishops, sitting on the board of seminaries and national church committees, and more.

I'm sure it's all important. But it's killing us.

We've all heard the military talk of "mission creep." The bishops have gotten caught in an "absence creep." Each decision to be away from the diocese makes sense in itself. Each is a "good thing." And others want the bishop to do it; there is what's called a "demand system." While on the other hand there is almost no "demand system" on the part of the static and declining parishes. In their increasingly weakened condition, they rarely ask for help.

A bishop is about three things

There are three areas that constitute the essential work of a bishop and a diocese.

1. The renewal and revitalization of parish churches.

The bishop needs to help all the parishes be communities that live and worship to the glory of God and in which the baptized are formed as instruments of God's love in their lives in families, the workplace, with friends and in civic life. This includes seeing that all parishes have worship that sweeps people off their feet.^[1]

2. Engaging the region of the diocese

The diocese can work for justice and compassion, in that state or city, on its own, as well as in cooperation with parishes and in collaboration with other denominations,

3. Connecting the diocese with the larger church

The bishop is an essential connection with the national and international life of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion.

There are also all sorts of odds and ends a bishop may need to deal with but these three things are the core. And the renewal and revitalization of parish churches is the primary task. If a bishop does the other two things and fails at this—that bishop has failed.

This isn't a question of priorities. I know that some bishops have listed parish development as one of their priorities. Then there are two or three other "priorities." Shaping parishes isn't a "priority" it is why the bishop is there!

The priorities need to be around how to act most effectively and efficiently in accomplishing the primary task. Do we give more energy this year to clergy recruitment and development or to setting up the two year leadership-training program in parish development? Priorities change but the organic reality doesn't.

The oversight and development of parishes is the primary task of every diocese. It's not a priority. It's the business we are in. If we are not working at that we are not doing our job.

Give an example

Here's an example of what a bishop's staff working with parish leaders might accomplish. In almost all cases if this is done, things will improve.

A turn around in three years:

1. Get a parish team in training, it must include the clergy. It needs to be training along the lines of the [College for Congregational Development](#), the [Church Development Institute](#) or [Shaping the Parish](#). The kind of training we are talking about is not a few weekends with Alban Institute. Even two years with one the major programs is for many people not nearly enough. They also need coaching and supervision.
2. Improve the Sunday morning experience in the first few months. Skilled parish development professionals need to "tell" in this case. Yes, tell the parish what has to be done immediately. Starting next Sunday. We might even make this a line to cross. Lay it out. Have a vote. If the congregations of the parish don't want to do what's necessary—fine, the pressure is off for now. But the diocese will also not spend energy on that parish.

It helps to have a place where the parish crosses a line and agrees to move into territory that may be unfamiliar and even scary. Of course, much of what we do in revitalization needs to come gradually, with nudging and invitation. We need to be patient and persistent with people. All true. And it is also true that can be energizing to make a decision that takes a bold action, that changes the way we do things, and that causes the timid to step back and stare.

3. Improve the parish web site in the first 4 months.
4. Begin a planned giving effort in the first 18 months. Act as though the parish is going to be alive in the future and will need resources that under gird its life.
5. Establish a system of coaching and supervision for the parish clergy. Separate the two. Supervision is about authority, responsibility and accountability. Coaching is helping the priest develop better skills for [instinctual intuitive leadership](#).

In relation to supervision, we need to shift from a stance of "do your best," "We all appreciate your efforts and how difficult it is" to a focus on results. We need to assess clergy based on results not on the process of things or their good intentions. We also need to insist that they get the process right. It's not adequate to begin with the assumption that going through the motions is all you have to do. The outcome we need is a healthy, faithful, growing parish that is to the glory of God and effectively forms people to be instruments of God's love in daily life. It is not simply good administration. It is not having many programs. It is not only membership growth is also health and faithfulness. The critical strategic act may be getting clergy to work on the right things.

Of course there are situations where because of internal resistance or contextual factors we will not be successful. The priest may do everything possible and yet not be able to bring about what is needed.

Finally, please note this is just about a "turn around." It is about beginning to get things on the right course. Think seven or eight years to see the fruits. A PDF on the [Process of Change](#)

We are not about closing parishes

This needs to be said. It is grounded in the understanding that a diocese's primary task is parish revitalization. There are of course other things a diocese does that are important. But our focus will be on helping our parishes become healthy, faithful and growing.

The bishop needs to say, and keep saying, something like this,

“The primary task of a diocese is to shape health, faithful and growing parish churches. That's what I will give myself to doing. That does not mean that some parishes will not need to be closed, or merged. It is about where we put our energy, attention and resources.”

Here's why we need bishops to say and do this.

First, it keeps us focused on the right things.

Second, it takes a lot of energy to close and sell churches. Parishes don't give up easily. Trying to “kill” them is a nasty and exhausting business. An attempt to hide what we are doing or smooth it over with indirect language only makes it worse.

What kind of cooperation do you think you're going to get from the leaders of a parish church if they are afraid that the diocese is looking their way so they might get the parish resources to use someplace else? In such cases many parishes begin to avoid contact with the bishop's office and hide information. It would be no surprise if rumors didn't spread about there being diocesan “death panels.”

I've actually heard diocesan leaders speak of closing parishes as being acts of bold and courageous leadership. I guess that might have been said of George Armstrong Custer.

Third, some parishes will close. This isn't about using all our resources and energy in saving the weakest parishes. It is about not investing ourselves in trying to kill parishes. Helping with these structural matters are part of what a bishop's office can do for parishes. If a parish's present life is out of alignment with the resources and energy, they have within the parish there is probably a need to change the structure of ministry.

Some places will close or maybe they will merge with another parish, or they might join in a cluster arrangement.

Forth, there is a closing fantasy. We can close parishes and we'll have all the assets to use for “mission.” The fact is that there will not be all that much. And most likely there will be a struggle over who gets the money. Which takes us into our greed. It is a disturbing dynamic when the parish in the next town is hoping your parish will close so they can have some of the money. Worse yet when you have succumbed to it yourself. And in the end, it is only postponing our decline.

Fifth, there's the question of when does it end? When have we closed enough of them? We act as though a diocese is a static system. We'll close some places, improve others, and it will stay that way. But we know better. There will always be parishes that become static or move into decline because of demographic issues or conflicts or poor leadership. Taking an active

stance about closing our parishes is a way to get smaller and smaller. When we do it just a few at a time we don't see the damage we are doing.

Sixth, it's a demoralizing process. It tears the heart out of people.

Seventh, demographics change. Many of us can identify areas where there use to be an Episcopal parish church. If only we had held onto that property. If only we had rented it to others for ten or fifteen years.

To say that we are in the business of health and growth that we are not in the business of closing parishes is not to say that some parishes will not close. It is not to say that we would just fund you endlessly. In fact dioceses need to stop funding some places. Let them make it on their own and if they can't make it, help them decide how they will change including if it is time to let go and close.

In making the choices about moving to a new way of parish life it is wise to have a process that maximizes the congregation's participation within the limits of what the diocese can afford in resources and time. Decisions made [in that way](#) cause less damage and are more sustainable over time and under pressure. A number of parish have made use of a [congregational options](#) process to explore and make such decisions over a period of 5 – 9 months.

Yes, we do know how to revitalize parishes

What Melissa did at Saint Paul's is based on approaches that are transferable to most parish churches. Others have seen success based on the same principles.

We can do better.

rag+

[i] In the Hospitality of God the bishops wrote -- "Worship that swept us off our feet and modeled what we might hope for in many more churches across the Communion"

"But it was at St. Paul's Seattle that we experienced most fully the power of shared gesture for building up a sense of the body of Christ and of a community intent on God." They then described the liturgy and then asked themselves a question, "What was special about this worship?"

They noted that it was fundamentally "familiar" and "conventional" and went on to share three elements that "contributed to its being a stunning and moving experience."

First, "a deep spirituality of engagement by the entire congregation."

Second, it was carefully choreographed and rehearsed, yet it did not feel precious or stilted; the whole liturgy was a beautiful dance."

Third, "the non-verbal participation by the entire congregation" referring to acts of mutual reverence that had the effect of "creating a sense of a community engaged in something entirely corporate and significant for them." [v]

"As a visitor to St. Paul's, it was easy to be swept up to fully participate in the liturgy because it was confident, well done and a genuine expression of the spiritual life of the body. It was simply true."